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By Charles Mohr

SECRECY AND DEMOCRACY: The CIA in Transition. By Stansfield Turner. 304 pages. Houghton Mifflin. $16.95

MORE than one Congressman has described the Central Intelligence Agency as a "rogue elephant." The institution that Adm. Stansfield Turner found when he was appointed Director of Central Intelligence in 1977 more nearly resembled a somewhat geriatric Missouri mule.

Although "the agency" has always contained perhaps the most impressive concentration of intellectual talent in the Federal Government and has done perhaps the best, most honest thinking in many diverse fields, it has been a bit like the late Mayor La Guardia in that its mistakes tended to be "lulus."

But Admiral Turner found a C.I.A. in which 30 percent of officers in the dominant espionage branch were 50 or more years old, crowding the agency's early retirement age. The leadership cadre had been recruited from the World War II Office of Strategic Services or in the early 1950's and was near the end of its service.

He found that "the covert action cupboard was almost bare." Although Congress was clamoring for greater powers of oversight, the C.I.A. itself had gone into a state of shock when abuses of 20 years of unsupervised actions had come to public light, and it had become so cautious that it had nearly handcuffed itself.

He also found a "tweedy," if intellectually impressive, analysis branch that had little prestige, tended to work on old, familiar problems and had little "marketing" ability to make its output appetizing to policy makers.

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On the positive side, he found a relatively new and vastly impressive capability to gather "technical intelligence" of astonishing accuracy and detail through satellites and sensors. But, even here, many in the espionage branch were suspicious of this asset.

When President Carter asked to see "overhead" photography of a minor war in the Third World, it took a balky bureaucracy weeks to comply, and Admiral Turner notes with exasperation that, while he was nominally the chief of debatably the best intelligence machine in the world, he could not get pictures of a "Mickey Mouse war." Even more serious, he found that he had little influence on personnel decisions; that "not one" senior officer agreed with his decision to fire two employees clearly involved in an improper association with a renegade retiree named Edwin P. Wilson, who is now serving more than 50 years in prison sentences for conspiring to smuggle weapons to Libya and to murder two United States prosecutors and six other people.

This book is not rich in cloak-and-dagger anecdote (possibly in part because of more than 100 C.I.A. deletions that the author calls arbitrary or "ridiculous"). But it is a valuable primer for a large majority of the public in the actual art of intelligence and, even more important, in basic principles and problems of reconciling what has often been called a "dirty, back alley war" with constitutional government and American political pluralism. The book is wiser than it is entertaining.

Unlike a school of troglodyte cheerleaders anxious to "unleash" espionage and covert action operators, Admiral Turner, firstly, recognized that the task of subjecting the C.I.A. to Congressional control was not impossible. He argues convincingly that years of unsupervised freedom required that agency officials always demonstrate perfect judgment on the feasibility as well as the politcal acceptability of their plans — something which, of course, they could not achieve. The relatively mild oversight imposed by the Congressional select committees on intelligence not only created accountability but spread it more widely, permitting, in fact, greater freedom of action.

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Admiral Turner also takes an unromantic, but sound view of covert operations (supposedly deniable propaganda, political or military operations abroad). Of his politically macho, but administratively untempered colleague, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, he says that the White House adviser "held unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved by covert action." Like more orthodox military operations, spooky high jinks must match goals with capabilities; it is fatal to confuse the allure of a goal with the means or lack of means to reach it — a point worth pondering in the current furor over the Contra operation against Nicaragua. Unlike some idealists, the admiral sees a role for covert operations but advocates a few shots well-placed on reachable targets.

Admiral Turner also makes the overwhelmingly important, but often overlooked point that most of the real "intelligence failures" in recent United States history have not been failures in the collection of intelligence but failures in interpretation and analysis of the data gathered. Of the political tremors that toppled the Shah of Iran in 1978, he notes that "most of the evidence about what was going to happen was available right on the surface" and that traditional espionage methods have not been useful in forecasting long-range political trends.

He also pushed for traditional "objectivity" in intelligence, arguing that it must provide real analysis, not "ammunition" for policy makers determined on a fixed policy.

It is somewhat poignant to consider how emphemeral his subtitle describing an institution in "transition" to a new generation of pros proved to be. Admiral Turner was replaced by an O.S.S. veteran and covert action enthusiast, William Casey, who has resisted Congressional oversight and has acted as a policy advocate. He is a man who in one speech described the well-documented abuses of the past as "mostly false." The admiral says it is Mr. Casey's remark that is false and dangerous.

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